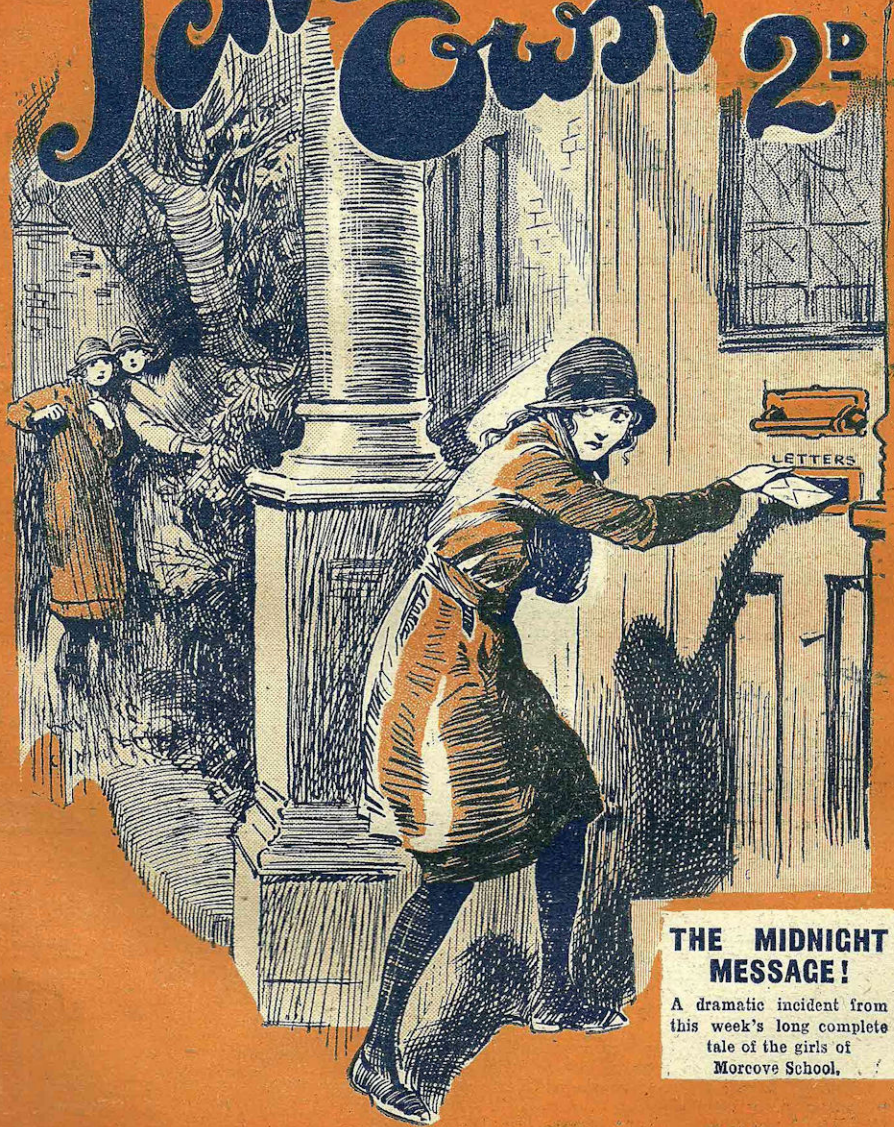


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TWO NEW SERIALS HAVE JUST COMMENCED!

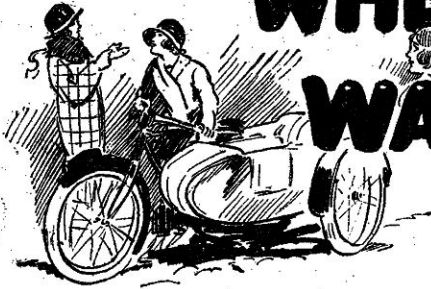
The Schoolgirl's Own 2^d



THE MIDNIGHT MESSAGE!
A dramatic incident from this week's long complete tale of the girls of Morcove School.

You will read here of the mystery which surrounded Zonia Moore, and of the girl who caused it.

WHEN MORCOVE WAS AMAZED!



By
MARJORIE STANTON.

Still a fugitive, although, did she only know the truth, Zonia could take her place again with her loving chums. Meanwhile that place is being taken by Miriam Loveless, the crafty girl whose scheming caused Zonia to run away.

A Message for Miriam.

THE Fourth Form at Morcove School was hard at work in its large and airy class-room when one of the parlourmaids came upon the scene.

"For me, Ellen? Oh, no, I see it is addressed to one of the girls," Miss Redgrave exclaimed aloud as she took the note from Ellen's salver. "Miriam Loveless—"

"Yes, Miss Redgrave!"

"A note for you, Miriam. You had better see if there is any answer."

The scholar in question came away from her seat with an air of being startled. Either she wished to be rude, or else it was sheer agitation that made her snatch the missive from the always gentle Form-mistress, and then tear it open with savage haste.

"Oh, all right; no answer!"

Handsome Miriam Loveless snapped out the words at the waiting parlourmaid, who had the sympathy of the class in general as she demurely departed. Paula Creel whispered behind a hand to Polly Linton:

"Bai Jove, that sort of thing awouses my wawth, Polly deah! Why can't the geal say 'Thank you'?"

Polly simply shrugged her shoulders.

Meantime, Miriam let her mincing step carry her back to her place in class—a seat next to Cora Grandways. The latter asked on the quiet:

"Anything wrong, Mirry? You don't look pleased?"

"I'm not," was the sullen reply from Morcove's new day-girl. "Mrs. Spenlow is going to look in presently to see my study."

"What a bother!" commented Cora, as if this news meant disappointment for herself also. "Will she hang around, Mirry?"

"Oh, I suppose she will stay to tea, and want me to go home with her!"

"So we shan't be able to go out, after all,"

Cora muttered glumly. "Oh, well, cheer up! Some other time, eh?"

But the mere frustration of their daring intention to run into Barncombe and get a bit of a "spree" was not engaging Miriam's mind.

As she went on with her work she seemed to see the study upstairs that her benefactress, Mrs. Spenlow, would want to be shown presently—the study that was shared with Madge Minden and Tess Trelawney—and on the walls one bit of Tess's clever work with brush and palette, in which Mrs. Spenlow had already been far too interested.

In her mind's eye Miriam saw that portrait of the now missing Zonia Moore which, when it had been exhibited at the Barncombe Art Show, had so fascinated Mrs. Spenlow.

The lady's first sight of that picture—it had been the beginning of all the desperate need for plotting and scheming. And now it was hung upon the study wall upstairs, simply waiting for Mrs. Spenlow to stand before it again and ponder.

"Girls, those of you who have not quite finished may complete the lesson between now and tomorrow morning," Miss Redgrave gladdened many a young heart by saying on the stroke of three-thirty. "It is such a lovely afternoon—"

"Yes, wather!" beamed Paula, promptly rattling down her pen. "After a cup of tea, bai Jove, we will— Gwacious! Healp!"

For that mischievous imp, Naomer Nakara, now that the dismissal had been given, could not resist the temptation to reach over, from where she sat behind Paula, and pull that elegant scholar's hair. And when Naomer pulled, even though it was only in play, she pulled hard.

"You wascal!" groaned Paula, whilst girls round about pealed with laughter. "Dwagging it out by the woots, you wetch! Howevah, it's tea-time—"

"Ooo, yes; queek, queek! My Jimmy will be waiting for his tea! You come and see me feed him, Paula!"

"Er—er—when I mentioned tea, Naomer

darling, I was not exactly thinking of your pet jackdaw. I was—in fact, don't you know, I was wather thinking of tea for myself. Yes, wather!"

"Ah, bah, I theenk you a very selfish girl!" said Naomer. Then she hugged her long-suffering chum, just to show that she didn't really think anything of the sort. "Good-bye-ee! I go and feed Jimmy!"

And the dusky one was off out into the open air, whilst Paula dolefully put her ruffled self to rights, and then fell in with Betty Barton, Polly Linton, and Helen Craig.

"Let's get tea over and be out by half-past four," proposed Polly a minute later in Study 12. "Come on, Paula darling; look alive and slam the things out! I'll pass to you!"

"Bai Jove—"

"Bread!" sang out Morcove's madeap, suddenly slinging across a loaf that had been snatched from the study larder. "Now the butter. We—"

"One moment, my gwacious!" pleaded Paula, diving to pick up the loaf that she had let slip through her fingers.

But Polly was already passing the butter without looking, and suddenly the tilted dish let the half-pound roll fall flop on to Paula's lowered head.

"What on earth—healp!" yelled Paula, as she put a hand to her scalp and felt a soft lump adhering to her tresses. "Ow, what is it? Polly—"

"Oh, sorry! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sowwy, bai Jove! It's butter!"

"Butter the day, butter the deed, dear!"

This misquotation so tickled Paula that, without even troubling to restore the butter to the dish, she flopped into a chair and bleated:

"Haw, haw, haw! How wiculous you are, Polly deah. But I shall have to withdwaw to wocover my pwooper deportment, bai Jove!"

"Department is good," smiled Helen, helping with the lightning laying of tea.

"Yes, I like departments; we had two in our garden once," said Polly, rushing the crockery to the table. "One died, and the other one, the wheels came off!"

"What's that?" Paula asked amazedly. "Polly deah—"

"Nothing that concerns little children. Run away, dear!"

"Weally!" Paula said bewilderedly, and went out, having first allowed laughing Betty to deposit the errant roll of butter upon the plate.

Then Madge and Tess came in.

"Any chance of begging a cup of tea, please?" Madge asked, looking as if she shared all the vexation that Tess was obviously undergoing. "The fact is—"

"Miriam seems to want the study to herself for a bit," chimed in Tess. "Mrs. Spenlow is due, and, of course, Madge and I would have been delighted to help Miriam get tea for the lady. But—"

"That's all right," Betty nodded serenely. "We know that Miriam is just about as friendly with you two as she is with the rest of us! There'll be tea in a jiffy!"

"And cake!" cried Polly, dumping down a laden platter. "And sardines!" as she fetched them from the cupboard. "Likewise"—with another dart to the larder—"cream buns! And if anybody would like some Swiss roll— Catch, Helen!"

"Well caught!" commented Tess, whilst she

and Madge helped to arrange the things. "One thing, girls, when, in trouble, there is always Study 12 to fly to!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" chimed in Paula, suddenly reappearing. "Geals, geals, what I always say is— Gwacious, healp! Who— Naomer, dwop it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" exulted Morcove's royal scholar, having come creeping in behind Paula to take a flying leap on to that scholar's back. "I love you, Paula!"

"But how I wish—healp!—you wouldn't dwag me about and wuffle me! Ow! Naomer, do—do dwop it! Geals, what's she doing now?"

Naomer, as a matter of fact, whilst still clinging to Paula's back, had shot out a brown hand and seized a spoon from the table. The sight of her brandishing this spoon caused Paula to squeal again:

"Dwop it!"

"All right, then, I drop him!"

And next instant the cold spoon was dropped down Paula's back!

"What— Gwacious!" shuddered Paula. "Healp!" She gave a second wriggle. "Ah, dear, life is simply one wound of twials!"

Whilst Polly and Naomer between them were making the long-suffering one sit down and let them fish up the spoon from the small of her back, a scene just as boisterous, but not so happy-hearted, was going on in Miriam's study.

There, Miriam had enlisted the aid of her only friend in the Form, lawless Cora Grandways, to help her prepare for Mrs. Spenlow's appearance.

The two girls were pretending to have a general tidy-up, but, in reality, there was a good deal of slamming things about needlessly, because they were things of Madge and Tess's.

"He, he, he! That's right; sling their stuff anywhere!" tittered Miriam. "It was good of you to come in and help, Cora! Beastly bore, my having to—"

"Shan't you give Mrs. Spenlow any tea, after all, Mirry?"

"No! Too much fag. She must be content with seeing the den—how nice and tidy it is. Ha, ha, ha! Here, Cora—catch!"

Miriam clapped three or four books together and slung them across to Cora. That girl, knowing they were Madge's books, let them flop to the floor, and then both girls shrieked with laughter as they saw that the "accident" had ruined the binding of one book.

If only another "accident" could ruin that fatful picture on the wall!

That was Miriam's secret thought whilst Cora stooped to gather up the books. And suddenly the day-girl yielded to a reckless impulse. She caught up a chair.

"This'll look better on the other side of the room," was her grinning remark, as she marched round the table with the chair before her, legs outward. "Makes more room for—"

Crash!

And the deed was done. Miriam had "accidentally" dashed one leg of the chair through the small oil-painting that was Tess's very best bit of portrait-painting.

"Oh, dear, now I've done it! Ha, ha, ha!" Miriam laughed. "Look, Cora!"

That girl was already doing so. She saw that the portrait of Zonia Moore had come away from its nail on the wall, and was impaled upon the leg of the chair.

"My word, Mirry—"

"Ha, ha, ha! How could I help it?" pealed

Miriam, giving the chair a shake that caused the split canvas to drop to the floor.

"Good job; there are too many of Tess's pictures always on show," Cora said spitefully.

"But, perhaps it can be mended."
With a wink and a grin, she picked up the canvas and hooked a finger into the hole. Then there was a rending sound—stur-rutch, stur-rutch!—as the hole became a big gap.

"What are you doing?" Miriam said, in mock dismay. "Give it to me!"

"But it only wants—"
"Another tear, yes," chuckled Miriam, as she and her crony had a tug-o'-war with the canvas.

Twice again there was the sound of splitting canvas. Then Cora drew off, laughing, with the square of battens on which the canvas had been mounted, whilst the relics of the portrait itself were in Miriam's hand.

Torn to ribbons, crackled and crumpled—ruined utterly! Such was the cruel fate that had come upon the famous portrait which was Morcove's treasured memento of Zonia Moore, the girl of whom they seemed destined never again to hear!

The deed was done, and although Cora Grandways suddenly looked as if she was feeling afraid of the consequences, Miriam Loveless only laughed again as she recklessly and savagely cast the relics to the floor, and stamped upon them.

"Mirry! I say, why—why do you seem to be so—so glad?" Cora palpitated. "There'll be a row—my word, there will!"

"What do I care?" the day-girl answered wildly. "It was an accident—you'll bear me out?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But—but why—"
"Because I felt I must—that's why!" was Miriam's blustering answer to the crony who was not in her confidence. "I was fed-up with seeing that picture always staring at me, when I'm stuck in this beastly study along with girls I hate!"

Destroyed for Ever.

ROUND about five o'clock, Madge and Tess repaired to the study that they were sharing with the day-girl, for they wanted to put their hats on to go for a turn out of doors with Betty and other chums.

To the two girls' surprise, Miriam was not in evidence when they got to the study. It was deserted.

"Yet we heard Mrs. Spenlow being shown to the study a while ago," said Madge. "I suppose Miriam did not give her any tea, after all. Perhaps Miss Somerfield—Hallo!"

"Yes, Madge, I was just noticing! Where is Zonia's portrait?"

It had rather annoyed the couple to notice, directly they entered the room, that the place had been turned about. Now they were utterly astounded.

With growing anger in their eyes, they stood and stared at the bit of wall where Zonia's portrait used to hang.

"We must know the meaning of this!" Madge exclaimed at last, indignantly. "What on earth does the girl mean? How dare she! How dare she take down any of the pictures! Zonia's too! That portrait—"

"Well, here is Miriam," Tess said, with wonderful calmness. Possibly she felt that it ill became her to show too much anger, since it was a bit of her own work that had been removed. Tess carried modesty to an extreme.

The day-girl's mincing step brought her, alone, to the study doorway, and coolly she faced her

schoolfellows, although she knew what was coming.

"Miriam," Madge began, "the picture of Zonia Moore—what have you done with it? It has gone from the wall!"

"Oh, yes, I know. I'm very sorry—"
"Sowwy, bai Jove!" came the astounded murmur from Paula Creel, as she and a few more of the Study 12 coterie now came up. "Aly gwacious, geals—"

"What's that? The picture of Zonia—"
"You needn't all speak at once, jumping down my throat!" snapped out Miriam, giving a tilt to her chin. "It met with an accident—"

"Zonia's picture? But how—when?"
"I knocked it off the wall when I was moving a chair. I'm sorry! I— You see—"



BUTTER FOR PAULA! As Paula dived to pick up the loaf, Polly passed the butter without looking, and the tilted dish let the roll fall plop on the Paula's head. "Heap!" cried Paula. "Ow, what is it?"

"Where is it now, anyhow?" they clamoured. "Surely it was only slightly damaged?"

"No. You see, I— It's difficult to explain—"

"So it seems!" cried out Polly. "My belief is—"

"Go on! Now say she did it for the purpose!" was the cry with which Cora Grandways flounced upon the scene. "As a matter of fact, I was here, and I can bear witness that Miriam—"

"Accident or not, where is that picture now?" Betty demanded flatly.

"It's gone—done for—"

"What?" they all shouted in one breath. "Done for?"

"Yes. It was so badly mutilated, I—I felt it would upset you less," Miriam artfully pleaded. "if I destroyed it right away. I am very sorry—"

"Oh, you with your parrot cry, very sorry!" fumed Polly. She stamped a foot. "That was Zonia's portrait! We would not have had it injured on any account."

"And you knew—you knew how we all valued it," Betty cried angrily. "It is the only portrait of Zonia we have ever had, and now it's done for, and Zonia is gone from us. Too bad, I say!"

"Shame—shame, so it is!" stormed several of them. "You must have been acting about, you and Cora, and—"

"Oh, hold your row!" screamed Cora, glorying in the chance to let off her spite against Betty & Co. "I know one thing—it is because it is Miriam's doing that you are making such a fuss! If it had been one of you—"

"None of us could ever have had such an accident with the picture," Madge said sternly. "Not to ruin it—no."

"You have a spite against Miriam," Cora declared viciously.

"Indeed?" said Betty drily. "It seems to me that she has had a spite against that picture!"

"Hear, hear!" said Polly. "And we'd like to know why!"

For the first time since the scene began, Miriam seemed to lose her nerve. There were those who marked her sudden flustered look, and thought it strange, not to say suspicious. As for Cora, it was like that spittle to use Miriam's agitation as an excuse for saying more abusive things.

"There you go, with your nasty innuendoes!" Cora snarled at Polly. "Why should Miriam have had any spite against the silly picture? The fact is, you are all as down on Miriam as you are on me! Miriam, you'd better come round to my study, and make that den yours!"

"I—I—I'd love to—"

"Then pray don't hesitate on our account," Madge said sweetly. "Tess and I have tried honestly to bear and forbear; but it is no use pretending. We would rather have your room than your company."

"That for you!" Miriam herself said, snapping her fingers close to Madge's nose. "That for the lot of you! I never want to have you for my chums—a poor lot like you!"

"She's got me, see?" exulted Cora. "Come along, Mirry. You can fetch your things away from this study some other time, when Madge and Tess are not here."

"She can do it now, for we are going out," said Tess. "I am not going to say anything about the destroyed picture, Miriam. All I will say is that Mrs. Spenlow is hardly likely to be pleased with the one friend you have found in the school."

"Yap, yap, yap!" jeered Cora, making a face at Tess as that girl, with Madge and the rest, walked out.

The chums were soon out of doors, but all inclination for tennis or a ramble had been spoiled by the cruel upset over the treasured picture. Betty, for one, could have wept. She always felt that she stood in the relationship of a very sister to poor, missing Zonia. The alleged "accident" to the picture, resulting in its total destruction, revived all the tragic anxiety as to what had become of Zonia herself. After all this time, where was she now, and why—why was nothing ever heard of her?

"You know," Polly suddenly exclaimed, whilst they were sitting about in talk under one of the playing-field elms, "I honestly believe Miriam had a sort of grudge against that picture!"

"You'll never get me to believe, anyhow, that it got so badly damaged by the accident," Betty

said disgustedly, "that it could not have been repaired."

"Bai Jove, I wondah what Mrs. Spenlow would say, if she knew, gals?" broke out Paula. "Mrs. Spenlow was always so attracted to that picture. You wemember—"

"Ah, of course!" Polly burst out, in sudden excitement. "I say, that's queer, you know! Mrs. Spenlow was expected to visit that study at the time the 'accident' happened! Look here—could Miriam have wanted to— See what I mean?"

"Phew!" breathed Helen Craig. "For some reason or other, Miriam didn't wish Mrs. Spenlow to see the picture again. But, what could the reason be?"

"There was a sudden thoughtful silence. "Stwange!" murmured Paula presently. "Vewy wemakable, what? Bai Jove, gals, it wather looks as if Miwiam was sort of jealous of Mrs. Spenlow's weward for the picture!"

"No; jealous of the girl whose portrait it was!" suggested Betty, her eyes aflash all at once. "It must be so. But, in that case— Wait a bit; it wants thinking about, this!"

"It does," Polly agreed, frowning. "Since Mrs. Spenlow has never even met Zonia, how on earth should Miriam be jealous of Zonia?"

They argued this way and that, without arriving at any feasible theory. Even so, what a panic Miriam herself would have been in had she known that the Study 12 girls had got so far as to be vaguely suspicious!

As it was, Miriam at that moment was jauntily re-entering the Grandways' study with the last of her possessions, brought away from the other den. Judith Grandways was off the scene, and to see only handsome, flashy Cora here, looking game for any misdeeds, made Miriam feel in the best of spirits.

There was nothing to worry about—nothing! So she was saying to herself triumphantly. The dangerous picture was destroyed for ever; Zonia Moore was—ah, never mind where!—safely out of the way, and if that wasn't good enough, what was?

And so—it delighted Miriam to think—all she had to do now was to make herself at home in this cosy den, along with her kindred spirit, Cora, and make the best of life at Morcove School by having a high old time with that lawless, fly-away girl!

Let Them Remember It.

AFTER Tea next day, two members of the Fourth Form came mincing out of the schoolhouse, to saunter across to the cycle-sheds.

Miriam Loveless and Cora Grandways were the pair.

Over an arm they each carried a light dust-coat, to be donned presently if they felt any discomfort from wind or dust whilst whirring along on Cora's "outfit" at a good pace.

The early evening was very warm and calm, however, and it was the couple's hope that they would not have to wear anything over their smart clothes.

Girls who go motor-cycling generally study ease and comfort rather than a showy toilette. With Miriam and Cora, smart dressing was a perfect passion. They were always out to get looked at admiringly, though very often they only succeeded in getting looked at in amused contempt.

Nor could some of the Study 12 coterie help smiling amongst themselves, at present, as Miriam

and Cora pranced by the tennis courts, where two brisk games of doubles were in progress.

"Off for a tear round, are they?" chuckled Polly. "They might be going to a garden-party! Oh, dear, what a taste!"

"You are envious, dear," grinned Betty.

"Very! It makes me quite savage," was Polly's jesting answer. "Fifteen all!"

And she served a ball that Paula Creel had to look lively to return.

All at once there was a deafening bang! from just outside the cycle-sheds, and then the tuff-tuff-tuff of the engine as the "outfit" went off.

Cora was astride the saddle, and Miriam in the side-car. Mr. Grandways, that ostentatious man of wealth, had insisted upon his elder daughter, Cora, being allowed to have a motor-cycle with a side-car—"so that Judy can ride, too!" But how rarely poor Judith Grandways had been out with her sister for a spin, the school knew. Practically never!

In fact, Cora had been running the cycle solo fashion, but now that she and Miriam had become such great cronies, the side-car had been re-attached, and this was not the first jaunt to which Miriam had been treated.

Away they went—pretty cautiously for Cora—down the school drive and out on to the highway. Then the fly-away girl in the saddle "let her rip," as her own phrase was, and the motor-cycle and side-car went tearing along—tir, rurr, rurr, rurr!—en route for Barncombe, apparently.

In a minute or so they were humming along the road where it ran close by Cliffedge Bungalow, where Miriam lived with Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow. That lady chanced to be busy in the new-made garden, and she had a special reason for straightening up and looking over the fence towards the road when she heard the hum of a motor-cycle.

Miriam did not want to be seen, and she huddled herself down in the side-car. But Mrs. Spenlow was soon giving a vexed frown that told how she had recognised the girl who was fly-away Cora's passenger.

"Too bad of Miriam," the lady exclaimed to herself, "when I have hinted so plainly that it is not my wish that she should do such things. I want her to put in her spare time at the school with the girls who play tennis, and so on."

After pondering uneasily for a minute, Mrs. Spenlow gathered up her gardening implements and took them to the shed. In half an hour she was entering the gates of Morcove School, simply attired, and with an air that spoke of anything but the great riches for which the name of Spenlow stood.

She and her husband were idyllically happy, living that simple holiday life at the pretty bungalow on the cliffs. The fresh air, the glorious views, and a garden to tend—these were more to Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow than motor tours in forty horse-power cars, and stops at big hotels.

And how it coincided with all her ideas of school-girl life, to wander up the drive and see the sports-field teeming with Morcovians, all enjoying their brisk summer games.

Mrs. Spenlow diverted her steps, and was soon passing amongst the players as a mere casual visitor who was going to enjoy looking on. It was like her not to want to make for the headmistress indoors, and begin a long complaint about the disappointment Miriam was proving.

"Hallo, there's Mrs. Spenlow!" Polly suddenly remarked, and she delayed the service of a ball to give a lively twirl of her racquet. "Good-evening!"

"Bai Jove—"

"Don't let me interrupt the game, girls," called out the lady serenely. "But, when you have finished, I would like a word with you."

"Very well, then!" sang out Polly. "Shan't be a sec. now, Mrs. Spenlow."

And a rapid bit of play brought the brilliant game to a finish, Betty, Polly, Paula, and Madge being the four who came across to Mrs. Spenlow at a run.

The girls were rosy-red with exercise, and fondly the lady smiled upon them as she saw them flicking back their hair whilst they stood getting their breath back.

"Well, girls? Miriam is not here?"

"No, Mrs. Spenlow. She—she's somewhere."

The lady discerned the reason for that vague answer. These girls were not ones to tell tales!

"Motor-cycling—there is nothing to be said against it, of course," Mrs. Spenlow exclaimed, after a pause. "Only I do want Miriam to be friends with you all, and not be always about with just one girl. You have been willing enough to be friendly, I am sure. Isn't she friendly towards you, then?"

"If only because—because you have been so nice and kind to us girls," Betty evaded again. "we would be glad to be friendly. But all girls don't like—well, games like tennis."

"Then I think they should," Mrs. Spenlow said flatly. "The point is, Mr. Spenlow and I sent Miriam to Morcove as a day-girl, simply that she might have the influence of a number of girl-chums. I shall say nothing to the headmistress at present, but I shall speak to Miriam again. And you girls will know, from what I have said, that I do hope—"

"Yes, wather!" Paula beamed. "We quite understand, Mrs. Spenlow."

"I am sure you do. There is no need for me to disguise from you that Miriam is proving a sad disappointment. She—she does not seem amenable to kind persuasion. Yet I dislike the idea of requesting Miss Somerfield to be specially firm with her. So, if you girls will just do your best—"

"Well, we'll try," Betty said earnestly. "And perhaps, in time—"

"Just so. If only the spirit of the school can take hold of her," Mrs. Spenlow exclaimed wistfully. "then she will go along all right. Well, I won't keep you from your games, but will go along, now I am here, and have a talk with your headmistress—not about Miriam's failings."

She had drawn off with a parting smile, when she suddenly paused, then came back a step.

"Er—girls—"

"Yes, Mrs. Spenlow?" They were close to her again in a twinkling.

"By the way, I feel I might just ask you this—on the quiet, you know. You—you have not heard Miriam say anything about her own parents being in this neighbourhood?"

"Miriam's own parents—in Morcove? No—"

"Bai Jove—"

"As a matter of fact," exclaimed Polly, "the only time Miriam has mentioned her parents, she has said they were—in London, wasn't it, girls?"

The others nodded, and Mrs. Spenlow looked relieved.

"In London is where Miriam's parents are supposed to be," she remarked gravely. "Perhaps you are aware, they are not by any means forbidden to see Miriam—oh, no! But my husband and I have an arrangement that we are to be kept informed of their movements from time to



JUST AN "ACCIDENT"! "That picture will look better on the other wall," said Miriam, marching across the study with the chair held before her. Crash! Miriam had banged the legs of the chair through the painting!

time. For all we know to the contrary, the Lovelesses are still in London. And yet—and yet—

She hesitated again.

"It is strange—it must have been a mere fancy of mine," came from her at last. "But, a day or so ago, in Barncombe, I saw someone who might have been Miriam's own mother!"

"Bai Joye!" breathed Paula. "Howevah, there is a great resemblance, sometimes, between one person and another, what?"

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Spenlow assented eagerly. "And I must suppose that it was a case of that kind. It would distress me greatly if Miriam's parents were in this district, unbeknown to me and my husband. Good-bye! I couldn't help asking you, we have become such friends! Good-bye!"

And this time she continued on her way to the schoolhouse, leaving behind four girls who somehow felt in anything but the mood to resume tennis.

"Odd!" Betty muttered, ending a very thoughtful silence.

"Yes," said Polly, with a tight setting of her lips, "another queer thing about Miriam! I don't know, it seems—"

"Strange," nodded Madge.

"Vewy, bai Joye! Geals, we shall wather remember this, what?"

Betty smiled seriously.

"I think we shall have to start a book, to put down in it everything that puzzles us about Miriam Loveless."

"She can be as nasty as she likes to us, we don't care, except that it makes it impossible for us to be friendly for Mrs. Spenlow's sake," said

Madge. "But what I don't like is the sudden feeling that Miriam is deceiving Mrs. Spenlow herself."

"Having her on '—yes," was Polly's way of expressing it. "After all that the Spenlows have done for her! Too bad, if it is so!"

Such Good Friends!

MEANWHILE, Miriam herself was lolling back in the side-car, thoroughly enjoying the pace which Cora was making. They had got to Barncombe—gone through it without stopping, Cora blaring away at the horn as they raced along High Street.

It had been their idea to leave the outfit somewhere and slip into the cinema. But the placards advertised such a poor show that both girls resolved not to go. They never even slowed down at the cinema, but carried on out of the town, soon flashing past Barncombe Castle.

And now—rurr, rurr, rurr!—on and on they were speeding, Cora saying aside to her companion that they would get to Exeter and back before dark!

This was only one of Cora's boastful flippancies. Had she seriously intended to carry on as far as Exeter, however, her companion would have been game. What Cora would dare, Miriam certainly could! Miriam was not the one who had to be indoors by call-over. The onus of doing that was upon the girl astride the saddle.

They were agreed that a big run-round in a circle that took in one or two towns of similar size to Barncombe would be best. The evening was keeping gloriously sunny and warm, with little wind, and it was simply perfect to rush along like this.

Miriam, if she had had any private anxieties, must have forgotten them for the time being. As a matter of fact, she never worried now about the crash it would mean for her, if—ever Zonia Moore came upon the scene again, to become known to Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow as the long-lost daughter whom they had yearned through the years to find.

Oh, no, it was all right now, in Miriam's estimation. Mother and father were taking good care about that! As for the life of misery and curtailed liberty that Zonia might be suffering—what did Miriam care? Her motto was: "Look after oneself!"

Cora changed gear to take one of the mighty Devonshire hills, and up the steep ascent they skimmed easily. And then a wide view broke out before them that enchanted even these shallow-minded two, and suddenly Cora pulled up.

"Besides," she chuckled, swinging off the saddle, "we want a cigarette, Mirry! You brought them, I hope!"

Miriam's answer was to wriggle about in the side-car until she had fished out her cigarette-case. They each lit up, smoking with an air of being grown-up, and not as if they were only doing it for a lark. Miriam retained her seat in the side-car. Cora threw herself down upon a grassy bank that was catching the yellowing rays of the westerling sun, and sprawled there with her usual abandon.

"How that brooch of yours glitters in the sun, Cora dear!" Miriam said by and by, admiringly.

"Well, it's real stones," was the airy answer.

"Oh, I knew that," laughed Miriam, puffing daintily at her cigarette. "I'm not out with one of the Study 12 girls, with their rotten imitation pearls. Ha, ha, ha! Well, the machine brought us along at a nice speed, Cora!"

"I'm just thinking how pretty you look, Mirry, with your hair fluffed by the wind. I say, it's nice being chums like this, isn't it? We do seem to go well together!"

"You are 'It,' Cora; just my sort. If it were not for you, I think I'd be on strike against turning up at Morcove every day."

"Wish I were a day-girl," grimaced Cora. "Wouldn't have to worry about being in fairly on time."

She got up, tossed away the finished cigarette, then stretched her slender arms and yawned, with a sort of feline enjoyment of the sun's last warm rays. Then she and Miriam put on their dust-coats, talking all the time about what they were wearing and would like to wear.

Their next stop was at a quaint little town about twenty miles from Morcove. They had lemonade and cakes, and did not hurry over the refreshments. Why should they, when it was still so early?

Yet it was only half an hour after this that they met with a hitch which made the time left to them for getting back seem unpleasantly short.

Suddenly, when they were going along quite gaily, on a beautiful stretch of lonely road between one village and another, the engine gave out!

"Oh, what's wrong now?" Cora exclaimed, instantly taking alarm. "I hope to goodness it is nothing serious, Mirry, for we shall be in a nice pickle if it is!"

She got down from the saddle in a fluster, and began to inspect the engine. Miriam, looking more amused than alarmed, alighted from the side-car and came round to watch the fiddling with sparking-plugs and what not.

Then suddenly Cora went off into a fit of laughter, hysterical enough to betray the suspense she had been in.

"Ha, ha, ha! How funny, Mirry! There is nothing wrong. The silly old thing has run out of juice, that's all!"

"Petrol? But have we got any to pour into the tank, Cora?"

They had not, as it proved. Cora's merriment did not survive the dismaying moment when she filched out a can from the front of the side-car, and found it—empty.

"Bother!" she fumed ill-temperedly, hurling the tin into the ditch. "We were a pair of idiots—"

"Well, I don't know; I left everything to you," demurred Miriam. "What a sickener, anyhow. Where can we get some?"

"Oh, the next village, for sure," Cora shrugged. "But it means pushing the wretched outfit all the way there."

"Couldn't you run along and get some, and come back with it?"

"Couldn't you?" Cora retorted, with none too sweet a smile. "No, this'll be quicker, and we have got to do what's quickest. We have no time to spare now."

"Well, don't worry. Even if we are late—"

"Oh, it's all right for you! You've only got to be dropped at the bungalow. I've got to be in by call-over," Cora said. "Come on! You push behind the side-car."

Then, for a good half-mile, they trundled the lifeless outfit along the road to the village. No easy task for a couple of girls who were not exactly sturdy, and the road was a rising one.

After many a halt to get their breath back, at last they came to a ramshackle place that showed a "petrol" sign. It was the village smithy, a lock-up place, at the end of the village. Cora,

red hot from her recent exertions, lost her temper again when she and Miriam found a written notice behind a grimy window of the forge:

"If closed, please apply at Myrtle Cottage."

"Myrtle Cottage? Where's that?" fumed Cora, stamping a foot. "Oh, we'll never get home at this rate!"

There was, indeed, a serious delay in fetching along the blacksmith's wife from Myrtle Cottage to open the lock-up forge and rout out a can of spirit. The prettiest chimes were ding-donging the hour from the village spire when at last the schoolgirl motorists got going again, but the bells did not sound pretty to Cora. Nine o'clock!

They would still be all right for time if they met with no further hitch. But something else had only to happen during the last fifteen-mile run, and—and happen it did!

Just four miles short of Morcove, the "outfit" stopped with such a violent, jolting abruptness that Cora nearly went flying over the handlebars. Miriam screamed as she, in turn, was flung forwards in her seat with dizzying violence. Then, with the steady hum of the engine no longer throbbing in their ears, both girls had a good opportunity of appreciating the dead silence of this lonely part where they were again stranded.

Four miles from Morcove, on a deserted by-road, with the open moor all around, and the dusk creeping on apace now that the sun was set!

Who is this, at such an hour?

"MIRRY!"

"Well?"

"That's what the trouble is, something gone wrong with the gears. And I can't mend it—utterly impossible!"



NEWS AT LAST! "Polly, Madge, Paula—all of you!" shouted Betty excitedly. "Look here! This writing—and the name at the end! It is from Zonia!" Never in all their lives had the girls known a more sensational moment than this!

Cora spoke hoarsely through the deepening gloom, for she was quite exhausted with a full half-hour's frantic tinkering at the broken-down motor-cycle. As she straightened her aching back at last, she took up a piece of rag and wiped her hands. They were simply black with greasy grime.

"Then what are we to do about it," exclaimed Miriam irritably—"I mean, about the bike? We must get on, of course. Enough time has been wasted, fiddling about—"

"Well, I thought I might be able to manage it."

"Oh, yes! But, somehow, I knew you wouldn't. Cora, you'll have to leave the thing here, beside the road, and—"

"No jolly fear! Leave it here, indeed—a hundred-and-twenty-pound outfit—for somebody to go off with! We can push it along."

"Four miles? Cora, how can you expect—"

"Oh, come on, be a sport!" implored the frantic Cora. "You have had a share in the fun; now take your fair share of the trouble!"

Sulkily, Miriam answered this by walking round to the back of the side-car, to be ready to push behind, whilst Cora would be also walking every step of the way, her hands thrusting at the handle-bars and doing the steering.

Dark night was upon the lonely moorland world by now. Cora had lit the acetylene lamps, but they were not working well, and both girls wondered where they would be if suddenly the wavering lights went out and they tried pushing on by only the light of the stars. In the ditch, most likely!

Nor had they gone more than the first few hundred yards when one lamp went out with a pop, causing Cora to gnash her teeth.

"Bother! They never do seem to work properly, those lamps. Mirry, do let's push on!"

"Goodness, I can't do more than I am doing!" panted that breathless girl. "There goes the other light, Cora, and now we are done!"

"Never mind. I can see—"

"Cora, you'd better give it up. It's risky, pushing this unlighted outfit along the highway. Supposing—"

"Oh, be quiet! This isn't a highway—only a moorland road. Nothing ever comes this way after dark."

"If only something would, for once!" sighed Miriam. "Then we might get a lift. Cora—"

"Oh, don't worry me!"

"It's no use. I'm not going to push the silly thing four miles to Morecove. You'll have to leave it here, off the road, and let it take its chance."

In the end, it was what Cora agreed to do, simply because another hundred yards or so convinced her that the lifeless outfit never could be trundled home. In the starshine, her handsome eyes were glistening suspiciously as she and Miriam finally pushed the thing on to the smooth turf beside the road. For once, Cora was in tears.

"I shan't be in till past lock-up time!" she bemoaned her plight.

"What about me?" grumbled Miriam. "I've got further to go than you. We come to Morecove School before—"

"You! You've only got Mrs. Spenlow to face."

"All the same, Mrs. Spenlow can be—"

"Oh, well, don't talk to me!"

There was unending silence after that, the two girls sulkily continuing what seemed an unending march for home. Hardly could they drag one foot

behind the other when at last they were within sound of the Morecove chimes.

Ten o'clock!

And still another mile at least for Cora to trudge along, whilst Miriam would have the extra distance to traverse between the school's gateway and Cliffedge Bungalow.

No doubt, the unhappy pair would be as thick as thieves again to-morrow. For the present, however, they were "off" with each other. A catastrophe such as they had met with is one for true friendship to alleviate. There was not true friendship between Miriam and Cora.

In the nightbound school building, when the couple came within sight of it, a light or two was still burning, one in the headmistress's study. Cora knew what it meant, of course.

"Oh, well, hother the row, if there is one!" she flared out savagely. "Here are the gates, so good-night, Miriam!"

It was not "Mirry" now.

"Good-night!" came, just as curtly, from the day girl.

Without another word, they parted. Neither wished the other good luck in getting out of the scrape. Rather was the thought of each girl: "You are all right. What about me?"

With Miriam dragging on, at a snail's pace, along the high road, Cora went sneaking in at the gates and up the drive. She was within a hundred yards of the front porch when she got a startling surprise.

There, dead ahead of her, was some other girl, lurking about as if she, too, was caught outside after lock-up time, and was afraid to knock for admittance!

Cora stopped dead, her crafty mind already agitating itself with the questions: Who could this other girl be? How could this other girl's plight be turned to one own's advantage? Was it one of the Study 12 coterie who was in such a nasty fix? Hurrah, if it was! Serve her right!

Then suddenly Cora's savage exultation changed to utter mystification.

Still holding back, where she was in deep darkness, under one of the trees lining the drive, she was amazed to see the other girl's figure make a sudden dart to the front porch, but not to ring the bell.

Instead, the girl quickly shot a hand towards the letter-box, as if to send some missive through the slot.

The action was plainly witnessed by Cora, for the girl in the porch was boldly silhouetted against the lighted windows of the porch door.

And now, as if the unknown girl's task was accomplished, that mysterious individual turned away sharply, and came fluttering down the drive.

This took Cora by surprise, and she became flustered. She made a nervous movement that betrayed her lurking presence, and suddenly the other girl stopped dead, with a gasp of dismay.

Then she would have run on again, but Cora excitedly darted forward to challenge her. If this was no Morecove girl after all, then who was the girl? What had she been up to?

"Er—hallo, who are you?" Cora jerked out feebly. "What have you—"

For an instant, the questioning voice was struck to silence; then came Cora's astounded, gasping cry of recognition:

"Zonia! It's Zonia! Stop, Zonia, stop!"

But, with a moaning murmur of great anguish, the challenged girl flashed about and ran off across

the field. In a moment or so the darkness had swallowed her up, and Cora was left standing motionless and wild-eyed, as if she had seen a ghost.

"Zonia!" was her incredulous whisper at last. "It was Zonia, creeping to the schoolhouse porch at dead of night!"

Why Was She There ?

MIRIAM LOVELESS had not gone more than a few hundred yards along the nightbound road when she stopped dead in mingled amazement and alarm.

Faintly, she could hear sounds that could only mean one thing, or so she thought. Cora had come tearing after her for some reason or other, taking a short cut across the games field, to overtake her, Miriam, on the road.

In an enraged, resentful way, she held still, to let the other girl catch up with her. There must be some strange reason for Cora's having chased back to speak with her. Or was it simply that Cora was going to implore her to come along with her, to be present when the irate headmistress had to be faced, and—

The sudden discernment of a vague girlish form looming rapidly towards her ended Miriam's impatient thoughts. She herself took a little run to meet the other girl. The irritable question, "What's the matter now?" was at her lips. And then, instead, she gave a great gasp of amazement.

It was not Cora, after all! This girl who had come rushing out on to the road, after scrambling through some gap in the school's boundary hedge—Why, good gracious! Oh, surely, it was—

"Zonia!" Miriam almost screamed. "Oh!"

For the second time in a minute or so, this fugitive figure gave a moaning sigh as recognition took place. For the second time, she who was the missing schoolgirl flashed aside and ran off into the protecting darkness.

Gone! Gone in a flash she was, and now it was Miriam's turn to be left standing with jaws agape, her frightened state a thousand times greater than Cora's had been.

Zonia, away from the custody of those who had got hold of her! Zonia! And she had been up to the schoolhouse for some reason or other! To disclose herself to Betty or some of her other chums? Was that the reason? If so—

It was the most wretched, panicky moment Miriam had ever known. She struck her hands together as she tried to get her chaotic mind to function.

Impossible to believe that mother and father knew what the girl had been doing to-night! No, this was some daring venture on the part of the girl, inspired by the cruel plight in which she was. But what had been her objective? Surely it was out of the question that she had been in communication with Betty and the rest at this time of night! Then why—why had she paid this secret visit to the schoolhouse?

On again Miriam wandered, at last, along the nightbound road to the bungalow. Her spirits were at zero. The scrape she was in over the hitch with the motor-cycle seemed a mere trifle now. What did it matter how annoyed Mrs. Spenlow might be over an affair of that sort when it looked as if the great crash was coming?

Whatever Zonia had been up to to-night, it must mean that she was getting respite—had suspicions by now, perhaps, that she was being cruelly victimised!

"Ah, it is coming—it is coming!" Miriam exclaimed distractedly to herself. "Sooner or later, the girl is going to get her rights, and then the Spenlows will be done with me! With a daughter of their own to devote themselves to, where shall I come in?"

She had all the more reason for dreading being cast off altogether by the Spenlows, not only because she had disappointed their hopes, but because they would be bound to know that she had been a party to all the plotting!

Lights were burning in the bungalow, and even as the scapegrace schoolgirl clicked the latch of the wicket the front door was opened by Mrs. Spenlow.

"That you, Miriam? Where have you been, keeping me up like this in such a great state of anxiety?"

"I—I'm sorry, auntie! I— The motor-cycle broke down."

"There must be no more going for cycle-rides with that girl Cora Grandways. Come in, and go straight to bed! It is simply too bad of you, Miriam, when—"

"Well, auntie, I couldn't help it! Accidents will—"

"To go rushing about with that Grandways girl is not the thing any daughter of my own would ever have done, Miriam!" Mrs. Spenlow said, with legitimate sternness. "Why don't you try to please me and Mr. Spenlow, by acting with a little consideration for the way we bring you up—just as if you were our own daughter? It is lucky for you Mr. Spenlow is still away in London."

"But, auntie—"

"It is no use, Miriam. To have been landed like this, you and that Grandways girl must have attempted far too big a run, seeing that you only started after tea. It made no allowance for possible hitches. Well, I am sure that Miss Somerfield will put her foot down now. As for me, I shall know what instructions to give about you, if, as looks like being the case, Mr. Spenlow and I have to go abroad in a week or two."

Miriam, standing in the lamplit lobby by now, stared.

"Go abroad, auntie?"

"Yes. But I am not going to enter into that to-night. Go to bed immediately, Miriam, and, understand, I feel you are making us a very poor requital for all the care and love that have been lavished upon you. It is at times like this," Mrs. Spenlow added sadly, "that I wish all the more my own poor lost daughter was with me, to have all that seems only to be wasted upon you."

"Oh, auntie, dear—"

"Good-night, Miriam!" And a commanding gesture went with the word. "The way to prove your regret is not by smarming over me, but by being a better girl, both here and at the school. Think what a life you enjoy, compared with what it might have been!"

And what it would be yet, Miriam was bound to say to herself frantically as soon as she was alone in her bedroom, if—if the crash came!

The Amazing Message.

"I GUESS Mrs. Spenlow was wild about it, too," said Polly Linton, after morning school next day. "Miriam has been looking as if she got a talking-to when she got home last night. "It was so silly of both Cora and Miriam to get so far away within an hour or two of nightfall!" deplored Betty.

All the Form knew that Cora Grandways had "caught it" properly from the headmistress, but so far as the Study 12 chums were concerned, there was no desire to gloat over the fact. For them it was simply a case of bitterly regretting once again that Cora, if only for her own sake, could not go the right way about getting fun out of life.

"It was simply asking for it, and now she has got it!" exclaimed Polly, whilst she and her boon companions sauntered around in the sunshine. "She knew that Miss Somerfield did not half like her having the motor-cycle at school. Now, of course, the thing will be forbidden altogether."

"Weal, geals, Corwa is Corwa, and always will be Corwa!" was Paula's sighing comment. "But it is greatly to be wewgetted if the other geal wewuses to make good in the school."

"Especially," murmured Madge, "when we had a hint last evening how Mrs. Spenlow feels the disappointment. The girl is simply throwing away her chances."

"Different from one girl I am thinking of!" Betty said musingly. "Somehow, I can't help comparing Miriam with Zonia. Poor Zonia, if only we could have news of her! Both girls have had a lot done for them, and how grateful Zonia always was, whilst Miriam seems to be—"

There was a sudden interruption. Helen Craig had come rushing up, with a look that proclaimed, "News!"

"Girls, what do you think the latest is about Miriam Loveless?"

"Going to be taken away from Morcove as a failure?" Polly promptly hazarded.

"Just the opposite!" cried Helen. "Any day now she may become a boarder! She—"

"Miriam a boarder? Oh, I say—"

"Bai Jove! Geals, that's what I call—"

"But why?" clamoured Betty. "The Spenlows live only a little way off, at the bungalow, and—"

"The Spenlows may have to go abroad. It is an unexpected thing for them," Helen chatted on. "But it appears that Mrs. Spenlow, talking with Miss Somerfield last evening, mentioned that Miriam might have to come into the school as a boarder."

"And that, perhaps, is another reason why Miriam is looking so humpy to-day!" smiled Polly.

"Humpy, bai Jove! Fwightened out of her vewy life, I thought her," simpered Paula. "I pwesumed she got such a lecture last night fwom Mrs. Spenlow, but appawently—"

"Miriam must be hating the idea of becoming a boarder!" exclaimed Madge. "She has let everyone know that she detests being here, even as a day girl."

"She had a bad night about something or other, without doubt," Betty muttered. "Look at her now—over there, pacing about as if she was worried out of her life! Hallo, though, here's Ellen, with something for one of us girls, surely!"

Eyes were turned from the dainty figure of Miriam Loveless, prowling to and fro on the grass in such a preoccupied manner, to the smart parlour-maid who was approaching briskly from the porch.

Ellen stepped quickly to Betty, holding out an envelope.

"I'd like to explain, miss," said Ellen. "This note for you was in the letter-box when I happened to look just now. It is so unusual to find

anything in the box, as the postman always hands in the letters. You'll notice—"

"Brought by hand!" Betty said in round-eyed surprise as she eyed the envelope. "No stamp, and it is simply addressed, in pencil, 'Betty Barton.' That's queer!"

"Whose writing?" Polly asked, whilst Ellen briskly departed. "Oh, some girl friend of yours wrote that, Betty! Perhaps one of the Stormwood girls cycled over this way, and—"

"Polly! Oh, Polly, dear—Madge, Paula, all of you!" suddenly burst from Betty, now that she had quickly opened the note. "Look here! The writing—the name itself, at the end!"

"What name? Why, Betty—"

"Bai Jove!"

"Zonia's writing! Her own name signed at the end!"

Never in all their lives had they known a more sensational surprise than this. At last—at last here was news of the missing schoolgirl! News penned by the girl herself! Yes, and by her own hand, surely, had the note been slipped into the school letter-box!

"Read it—read it out, Betty!"

"My gwacious, yes! Geals—geals, this takes my bweath away, bai Jove! A witten message fwom Zonia!"

"Listen, then!" Betty spoke, giving her eyes to the half-sheet of paper that a shaking hand held. "There are only a few lines. 'This is to let you know that I am safe and well—'"

"Safe and well! But—"

"I ought not to be writing this," she goes on to say, "but I simply can't be silent any longer, when I know how anxious you must all be. Oh, Betty, darling, this brings you oceans of love from your poor Zonia! Give my love to all the chums, as well as to dear, kind Mr. and Mrs. Barton. If you only knew, all of you, how I am placed! Then, if you have ever felt angry with me for the anxiety I have caused you, you would soon be able to forgive—Your Unhappy ZONIA."

"Is that all, Betty?"

"That is all."

There was a prolonged silence. All at once Betty was wiping tears from her lashes. Polly took the note, to read it again, but she had to give up the attempt, for her eyes also were dim. It was with a tearful voice that Paula Creck at last ended the tragic silence:

"Weally, I—I— Geals, this is wather upsetting—what! The poor geal has witten those lines to weliwe our minds, but—"

"She has kept away from us, knowing all the time how joyfully we would welcome her back to our midst," said Madge.

"She came to the school—in the night, was it?" Helen whispered. "Anyhow, she herself delivered that note, and surely that means that she is not so very far away all this time!"

"But how is it possible?" Betty exclaimed incredulously. "Think of the inquiries that have been made! Yet you are right, girls. It must mean that Zonia, after all, is still in the district!"

"Bai Jove, you know, we'll have to do something at once!" Paula was going to say, but she broke off at the sight of Miriam coming across to speak.

And Still She is Fate's Favourite.

"WHAT is the sensation, you girls?" the day scholar asked, with affected airiness.

"Did I hear you talking about Zonia Moore?"

"Yes," Betty answered crisply; "we have had a note from her."

"A—a message from Zonia! Oh, then, now I—I mean to say, what a surprise! May I see?"

"You can't be very interested," Betty said coldly. "Remembering how you served the picture of Zonia, I think you'd better not be entrusted with the letter."

"No, bai Jove! Quite wight, Betty! Bai Jove—"

"What do you mean?" Miriam panted, unable to conceal her agitation. "Do you suggest that I—that Zonia— Oh, what nonsense it is! What is Zonia Moore to me?"

"Then why should you wish to see the letter?" was Polly's prompt retort.

"Come away, girls," advised Betty tensely. "Miss Somerfield is the one to be shown the letter—at once! We'll go to her now."

justly loved. When the chums ran to her, and Betty passed her the amazing message, she began by looking dumbfounded and ended by being overwhelmed with her emotions.

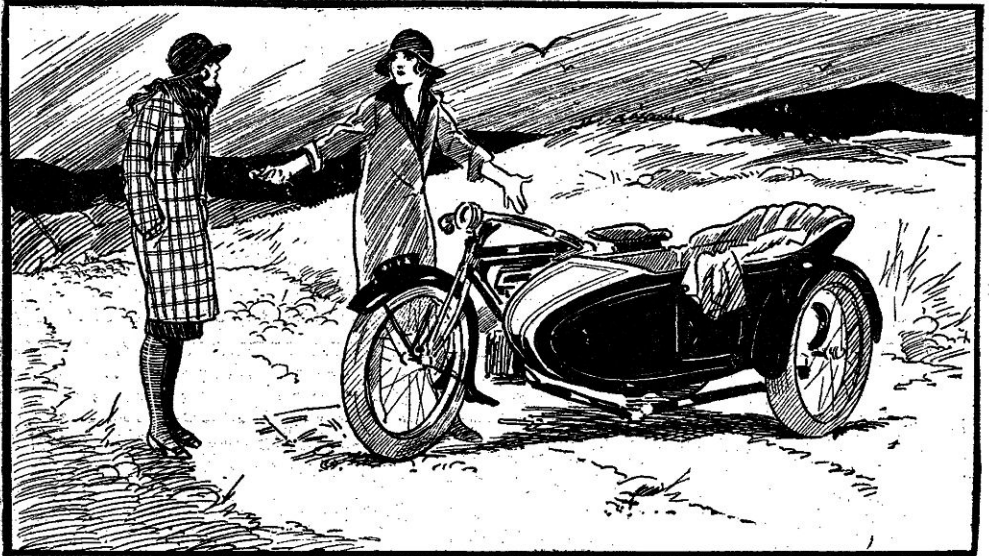
Throughout the school, before another minute had sped, the thrilling news was known.

Zonia Moore had sent a message to Betty Barton! In the dead of night, Zonia had actually paid a secret visit to the school, to slip the note into the letter-box!

Morcove was amazed.

And so a hundred other voices echoed the unanswerable questions which the Study 12 chums had already pondered. Where was Zonia at this time that she could pay such a secret visit to the school, choosing her own time and way? Above all, why—why had she been compelled, in the first instance, to go into hiding?

It was the one topic during dinner. It was something that came between all the girls and



STRANDED! With the engine of the motor-cycle no longer running, Miriam and Cora had an opportunity of appreciating the dead silence of the lonely part in which they were stranded. Four miles from Morcove—with the dusk creeping on apace, now that the sun had set!

"Yes, wather! And afterwards, bai Jove—"

"Mrs. Spenlow will be grateful if we let her know," murmured Madge. "How absolutely extraordinary it is! Thank goodness, anyhow, Zonia is all right so far!"

"Ah, but what is the meaning of her keeping out of our lives?" sighed Betty, as they hurried to get indoors. "So far as we knew, she hadn't a care in the world."

"How is she contriving to exist?" wondered Polly. "Of course, there has always been a good deal of the gypsy in her. She could live when others would starve. But where is her hiding-place?"

"Why she was forced to run away—that's what we want to know!" exclaimed Helen, with a brain-racked look.

As it chanced, they encountered Miss Somerfield in the hall. The lady was intending to take one of her customary ten-minute turns in the open, to mingle with the scholars by whom she was so

their work during afternoon classes. Gradually, the excitement and suspense about the missing girl had been dying down of late. Now it had leapt to life again.

If only the pencilled note could result in some clue being found at last!

But it was not to be.

The pathetic message served the one purpose that the poor ill-fated girl had intended it to serve. It assured those who cared for her that she was "safe and well." Where she was to be sought, however, why she still had to keep out of all their lives—this the letter would enable no one to discover.

Heartily glad were Betty & Co. when school was over for the day. Not that they had any of the usual eagerness to be off out to games. Study 12 soon harboured a batch of chums who were getting together like this to discuss the day's sensation.

Naomer came in presently. She had been

paying her usual after-school visit to Jimmy, the jackdaw.

"I meet ze Miriam girl as I am coming upstairs," she announced, showing her pretty teeth in a roguish smile. "So I ask her if she go for anzuzer motor-bike ride this evening!"

"The answer being in the negative," guessed Polly: "And a pretty sharp negative, too!" "No; she laugh, as if eet is all a joke," was Naomer's surprising answer. "I theenk ze Miriam girl has something to make her feel very amused all at once. I see her going out for ze walk, all smiling."

"Really?" exclaimed Betty. "That's odd, because she has looked so worried all day. What's the reason, I wonder?"

The reason? Not one, alas, that Betty & Co. were likely to guess at!

Miriam was on her way across to the bungalow, in response to a message that Mrs. Spenlow's maid had suddenly brought her. From what the maid had said, it appeared that both Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow now found that they were almost certain to have to make an immediate departure for the Continent.

Indeed, Mr. Spenlow was staying on in London, so that his wife might join him there for the journey whenever she was wired for.

It would mean, of course, Miriam's immediate reception into the school as a boarder. But if this was going to be a "sickening nuisance" for the girl who liked to be as free as the air, it also meant that the Spenlows were to have no chance of an encounter with Zonia!

No wonder, then, Miriam was feeling overjoyed!

If only the Spenlows did go abroad at once, the situation would be as safe as ever—a thousand times safer!

She knew that her own parents were at their wits' ends, because they knew not where to take Zonia if they took her away from the lonely house that was but a couple of miles from Morcove. That being the case, it was desperately necessary that the Spenlows should be the ones to leave the district. And they were leaving!

"As for my having to be a boarder," Miriam pondered, jauntily stepping along, "it seems I am to be entrusted with the key of Cliffedge Bungalow whilst the Spenlows are away, and what fun that will be! Cora and I, with the run of the place, all to ourselves!"

For she had made up her tiff with Cora.

Thus another day was ending at Morcove School, with Miriam still able to glory in the luck that seemed always ready to save her. Whilst Betty & Co. could still only rack their brains in vain concerning the mystery of their dear Zonia's disappearance, because the hour had not yet come when they would have begun to understand.

But it was coming, that fateful hour, and in its wake would come such a race against time as the chums of Study 12 had never known before.

A race against time to get certain sudden suspicions tested, proved—a race to track down the missing Zonia, and have her triumphantly produced, before the Spenlows had gone abroad!

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)

Suppose the Spenlows go abroad before the missing Zonia is found! How easy it will be then for Miriam Loveless to hide the truth, which only she and her parents know—that Zonia is the real daughter of that couple! Who will win in this race against time? You must certainly not miss next week's splendid tale, which is entitled:

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